

A picture is worth a thousand corpses: Audiences' affective engagement with *In the Flesh* and *The Walking Dead* through online image practices

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Abstract:

Utilising netnography, this study examines how users' image texts demonstrate active audience engagement with TV horror, with a particular focus on zombie texts. As part of the wider 'zombie renaissance' that has seen the mainstreaming of the undead, the 'blankness' of the zombie provides a range of affective meaning with horror screen media. Beginning with an analysis of BBC3's *In the Flesh*, fans' image posts parallel the relative state of the series. During broadcast, image texts centre on the melodrama of characters' relationships. Yet, during the second series' production, 'pre-textual poaching' of set locations and of the cast socialising verifies/reinforces that there is still life in the fictional text. However, upon the show's cancellation fan activists use the text's undead imagery to mirror the abject state of the series itself. Thus, this study demonstrates how image posts can be dynamic in their affective relationship with screen media. Then, in highlighting the dexterity of audience image practices and giving much-needed attention to how race can intersect in participatory cultures, this study looks at how audiences use memes to criticise AMC's *The Walking Dead*'s representation of Black masculinity. Using *TWD*'s own imagery, memes highlight the reductive and/or problematic construction of Black males in the text. Resultantly, anti-fans demonstrate a 'discursive prioritisation', which elevates racial readings with memes constructing a visual 'truth' about the series. As such, this study widens the analytical scope of participatory cultures' online textuality, highlights ongoing dynamic affective engagement horror fans can have with media content, and brings to the fore the intersectional identity politics of fans of colour.

Keywords: Online Images, Textual Poaching, TV Horror, Fans, *In the Flesh*, Fan Activism, *The Walking Dead*, Memes, Anti-fandom, Race

Introduction

The Web 2.0 landscape is one abound in images, offering a range of texts, genres, and practices. Consequently, the 'web interfaces of Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube, among others, not only allow, but also encourage visual commentary' (Gillan 2016:13). Paul Booth argues that 'image-focused' communities on social media offer audiences 'new ways of experiencing, creating, and sharing texts' (2016:211). Similarly, Rhiannon Bury writes that, 'platforms such as Facebook and Twitter not only enable new ways to spread media content but serve to alter existing fan practices and create new ones in ways that further complicate [conceptualisations of participatory cultures]' (2017:92). This 'visual turn' has been further aided by the rise of 'smart phones with cameras and fast broadband connections for downloading images and video files ... [becoming] increasingly available' (Rettberg 2014:3). Therefore, whilst studies (e.g. Jenkins (1992), Pugh (2005), Hellekson and Busse (2006)) have traditionally examined audiences within participatory cultures that centre on transformative and/or affirmational writing (Winterwood 2018), user-produced image texts require further critical attention (Schreiber 2017:38).

Concurrent to the growing trend of audiences' image posts engaging with popular culture (Bennett 2014:8), horror television has become 'an ever-burgeoning TV phenomenon that now spans all televisual realms' (Belau and Jackson 2018:1). Yet, whilst the twenty-first century has given rise to a 'new Golden Age of TV horror' (Abbott 2018:120), academia has neglected empirical audience-based research of horror audiences (Barker et al 2016:66-7). As Hills notes, 'horror audiences have been poorly served by theories of the genre aiming to resolve the "paradox" (why do people enjoy seeing images that they should find repulsive?)' (2014:90). Yet, 'audiences can ... produce their own mediated framings of textual meaning, for example blogs and reviews' (ibid:91). This paper addresses the dearth of academic research in this field by analysing how audiences respond to, and engage with, TV horror through the production and circulation of images texts online.

Taking one subsection of horror media, this study focuses on audiences of the TV zombie. The larger 'zombie renaissance' (Bishop 2015:5) has seen the popularisation of the undead over a range of media (Moore 2016:299-300), demonstrating 'the growing importance of zombie texts and zombie cultural practices in popular culture' (Hubner et al 2015:3). Furthermore, 'the zombie phenomenon has extended far beyond the text to find expression in a rich variety of fan practices' (ibid). Paul Manning argues that '[t]he blank democracy of the zombie text offers an open field for fan practices and fan inscription, processes which are accelerated in the age of digital technologies' (2015:166-7). As such, zombie texts make particularly rich sites for examining various ways online audiences engage visually with TV horror.

The article begins by analysing fan imagery of BBC3's TV horror *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) (hereafter *ITF*). Despite limited distribution outside of the UK¹, *ITF* has a highly active international fanbase (Woods 2016:84). Yet, there has been little analysis of these audience members. Undertaking a longitudinal analysis, this study takes repeated observations to

deconstruct how fans' image posts correspond to the relative state of the series. During active broadcast, fan visual posts underscore *ITF*'s melodramatic relationships between central zombie protagonist Kieren (Luke Newberry) and other 'partially dead sufferers', humanising them in the process. However, when *ITF* is on hiatus, images of the second series being filmed act as a form of 'pre-textual poaching' (Hills 2010), reassuring fans about the ongoing production status of the text. Fans then attempt to restore affective engagement with the show's characters by posting images of the cast as friends, verifying characters' diegetic relationships. Finally, when *ITF* was cancelled and fans turned to activist practices, imagery focuses on the undead characters, mirroring the state of *ITF*. Therefore, this study offers two salient interconnected findings. Firstly, tracking imagery posts evidence snapshot and shifting fan affective engagement and attests to the range of textual meanings horror audiences can make. Secondly, audiences' responses manifested through the type of image content they produce is informed by, and develop in relation to, the series' temporal qualities (Booth 2016:11).

Whilst the first data set demonstrates affective engagement around the melodrama of love and loss in *ITF*, '[w]e must be mindful that thematic and visual considerations of ... [the] zombie respond to changing cultural requirements, open to interpretation by filmmakers, audiences and critics alike' (Austin 2015:175). All audiences do not engage with all zombie texts in the same way. In highlighting how the zombie has become a popular figure in horror television but expanding the transatlantic scope of this research, the second half of the article explores how the proliferation of meme images evidence a dominant text(uality) for audiences engaging in racial discourse surrounding AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-) (hereafter *TWD*). Despite cult popularity, *ITF*'s relatively niche status is partly due to its limited broadcast remit since BBC3 is a British youth-targeted digital channel. In comparison, *TWD*'s basic cable industrial background has a much wider audience remit than BBC3. Furthermore, *TWD* as a transmedia franchise has an expansive international breadth of formal distribution² and much larger textual corpus that extends the hyperdiegesis beyond television. Likewise, as an adaptation of a much-championed comic book series, the TV iteration of *TWD* had a pre-existing fandom to build on. As such, *TWD* has been hugely popular in mobilising 'fan communities who embraced its zombie-genre heritage' (Hassler-Forest 2014:91) but has also attracted 'many [new] viewers on the basis of its Quality TV credentials' (ibid). Yet, while such accolades are largely attributed to *TWD*'s complex mature storylines (Teurling 2017:6), and graphic aesthetics traditionally bestowed to premium subscription television (Jowett and Abbott 2013:12), audiences of colour have found the text's representations of race problematic (Steiger 2011, Johnson 2015). As one fan notes, *TWD*'s 'blatant "Black Man problem" ... has spawned a million memes'. It is these memes that the article will analyse. Therefore, if the first half of this article gives attention to a fandom hitherto unexplored academically, the second half of the article gives attention to an audience demographic frequently ignored in Fan Studies (De Kosnik and carrington 2019).

Demonstrating racial ‘discursive prioritisation’, Black audiences elevate this subtext ‘to the status of narrative focus ... selecting out one thread of polysemic textual material for communal and discursive prioritisation’ (Hills 2015a:153). Image texts provide a ‘truth’ about *TWD* shared by audiences utilising content from the series itself that (re)inscribes the Black male body, whilst criticising *TWD*’s engagement with race in the process. Thus, whilst the content of *ITF* fan’s image texts changes over time – screen grabs, location photos, reposts, activist imagery – *TWD* memes’ imagery and thematics stay largely consistent – focusing on screen representations of black masculinity – as the series develops.

Certainly, a range of zombie and/or wider TV horror texts could have been included in this research, however considering how race is frequently read through *TWD* gives much-needed attention to audiences of colour in Fan Studies (Wanzo 2015), and to Horror Studies (Brooks 2014). This study highlights the importance of race in intersectional readings of horror and (anti-)fan identity performance, and where such vantage points flourish or are stifled online. In doing so, the research seeks to better serve fan scholarship on race and ethnicity (De Kosnik and Carrington 2019). It also demonstrates ‘ways in which zombie texts can be appropriated and enjoyed by fans’ (Hubner et al 2015:8) by the various types of image texts produced.

Methodology

To examine online horror audiences’ image texts and practices netnography, the study of ‘complex cultural practices in action, drawing attention to a multitude of grounded and abstract ideas, meanings, social practices, relationships, languages, and symbol systems’ (Kozinets 2010:25), is used. Yet whilst Kozinets explains that netnography can investigate posters’ ‘images, drawings, [and] photography’ (2015:5), research in these practices are lacking in comparison to studies of online writing. Thus, image-based netnography needs further unpacking.

Digital audiences are ‘prosumers’; both consumers and producers of media content. We can analyse ‘produsage as a form of audiences’ experience; and produsage from the more text-centric stance, looking at produsage as a form of interpretation and reception’ (Pavličková and Kleut 2016:351). Considering this in relation to online image cultures, Newman explains that textual meaning is ‘socially produced’, evident in audiences’ ‘productive, interpretive work’ (2014:127). Particular ‘moments and fragments, abstracted from the whole of the [media text,] ... are their own units of meaning which circulate in a contemporary quotation culture, particularly on websites of the sharing Internet’ (ibid). Thus, what fan and/or anti-fan imagery focuses on can evidence both individual and collective readings of screen media (Bore 2017:13, Thomas 2013), and highlight audiences’ ‘affective registers’ toward screen texts (Hillman et al 2014:5).

Image posts can also be ‘detached from the original context from which they take their textual meaning’ (Gillan 2016:14). Therefore, media texts’ ‘original meanings are subverted, or at least opened up to recontextualizations’ (Hagman 2012). Resultantly, images texts can illustrate a shift in audience focus and engagement with media texts, and

‘visual data analysis can unearth aesthetic, embodied and affective aspects of communicative relations which might otherwise be overlooked’ (Schreiber 2017:37).

Furthermore, specifics of social media sites shape users’ content and context (Kozinets 2015:17). Tumblr abounds ‘with image posts, many without substantial text to contextualize or expand upon the visual’ (Thomas 2013). Twitter, on the other hand, allows users 240 characters to supplement imagery. Image posts on a Facebook or on blogs are afforded ample space for accompanied writing to give clear context and anchor meaning. Moreover, Facebook’s chronological linearity provides the sequential ordering of archived posts (Kozinets 2015:74-5). Comparatively, Tumblr and Twitter have traditionally been ‘almost defiantly nonhierarchical, decentralized and uncontrollable’ (Morimoto and Stein 2018). Resultantly, the ‘rhizomatic spread and limited authorial content’ of image texts on Twitter and Tumblr means retweeted/reblogged content ‘is no longer in the control of the original poster’ (ibid). Yet, the recent controls Tumblr has enforced on the types of content allowed on the site (Martineau 2018), highlight how digital spaces and the type of material they house, whilst consistent, are neither static nor finished. Thus, the spatiality of online sites, combined with their technological specifics impact on the materiality and semiotic slippage of user content.

Likewise, some image texts and practices have their own codes and conventions. For example, memes of popular culture provide individual creativity and shared (sub)cultural experience, utilising remix culture to encode meaning (Shifman 2013:365-7). Visual memes can be conceptualised as ‘macros’: ‘image[s] superimposed with a caption which subverts the meaning of the picture ... [to] negotiate and at times subvert the meaning of a text’ (Harman and Jones 2013:954-5). One of the most generic “‘expectations” for many Internet memes ... is that they be humorous’ (Shifman 2013:365), acting as ‘a mechanism through which we erect and maintain symbolic boundaries’ (ibid). Political messages can also be translated into ‘memes’ utilising humour for civic engagement ‘to comment on a current issue’ (Jenkins 2016:43), providing (counter-)responses to hegemonic and/or emerging cultural phenomena (Jungherr 2012). Furthermore, because of the low-level barriers to creating content (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2015:5), combined with easy spreadability over social media (Jenkins et al 2013:28), memes evidence an increasingly active audience engaging with media culture.

Such considerations of text types and online spatial affordances also need to acknowledge the habitus of collective spaces that may contextualise image content/practices. For example, whilst some online horror forums demonstrate ‘knowledge over affect’ in fan engagement with media (Hills 2005:75), ‘Tumblr users tend to use images, animations, videos, and GIFs ... to reflect an emotional state’ (Booth 2016:4). Therefore, different image texts that evidence different engagements with extant media objects, in different spaces offer different instances of identity performances (Kozinets 2015:228).

The research utilises two data sets. Firstly, image posts and screen grabs were sampled from three *In the Flesh* Facebook groups: ‘In The Flesh’, ‘In the Flesh Fans – BBCThree’ and ‘#saveintheflesh Campaign Group’, spanning a temporal range from 31st

March 2013 to 10th May 2016³. Facebook offers a range user-created ‘interest and identity groups’ (Kozinets 2015:16). Moreover, its chronological sequencing of posts allows for a longitudinal examination of fan discourses and discussions (Schreiber 2017:42), whereby repeated observations within these groups analyse image texts at a given period but also monitor and explains differences over time.

The second data set focuses on *TWD* memes. Given the ‘spreadability’ of memes (Jenkins et al 2013:2-3), and their rhizomatic dispersion (Morimoto and Stein 2018), the sample was taken from Twitter, blogs, and websites such as *Nerds of Color*. Twitter and other sites ‘cater to all sort of local, identity, activity and interest-based tastes and social configurations’ (Kozinets 2015:17), whilst allowing users to share information, offer opinion and responses, and perform identity, yet users are less pressurised by ‘a deep engagement in social relationships’ (ibid:35), that may refute and quash particular discourse, and those who present it (e.g. Johnson 2015). Since this data set is from multiple sites, such fragmentation means chronological archiving is not possible. Rather, I use *TWD* characters from specific series present in meme texts to anchor fan discourse. This starts from season 1 (first broadcast 5th November 2010) through to season 6 (first broadcast 12th October 2015).

Follow up interviews and surveys can support netnography, allowing researchers to focus on specific points, elaborate on grey areas, and confirm subjective points of view (Kozinets 2010:46-7). However, due this study’s large data sets, netnographic analysis without further audience-based research was deemed suitable. Here, ‘[s]trategies of interpretation of multimodal material such as screenshots ... take into account the respective logics and (visual) modalities of the available data’ (Schreiber 2017:38). In terms of analysis, ‘[s]ymbolic netnographers ... find interesting sites, cultures, groups and people and translate their meaning systems as values, practices and online social rituals’ (Kozinets 2015:246). Therefore, ‘[d]iscourse is a key construct’ (ibid). Unlike sequential written content, ‘pictures convey meaning in a simultaneous manner and therefore allows us to show different layers and aesthetics at the same time’ (Schreiber 2017:47). Irmgard Wetzstein’s discourse analysis of individuals’ image texts ‘addresses thematic patterns and narrative structures forming meanings and social practices and respective power/knowledge regimes’ (2017:27). To do this she asks, ‘[w]hich thematic patterns are narrated? ... Which actors are depicted visually? What relations are visible among the identified actors? ... [And which] visual perspectives are used in which context?’ (ibid). Informed by Wetzstein, my analysis focuses on ‘visual and verbal contents, actors, and visual thematic patterns’ (ibid:29).

Furthermore, given that ‘[o]nline data is highly varied in its media, formatting, and coding’ (Lamerichs et al 2018:187), whilst analysing the discourses present in the data, one ‘must not ignore the producers of the images and those distributing those visuals’ (Wetzstein 2017:28), and the sites where they are disseminated and shared. Schreiber ‘propose[s] a *triangulation of methods* as fundamental; this implies that three conceptual aspects – practices, pictures and platforms – are objects of investigation of three methods – visual analysis, text analysis and platform analysis’ (2017:38). Analysis, then, considers the

semiotics of texts individually, but also how such images offer collective manifestations of audience discourse (Kasra 2017:52). As such, the research combines close textual readings of users' visual posts (Schreiber 2017:40), with 'distant' readings that 'examine the data networks and their larger patterns' (Lamerichs et al 2018:187).

Given this audience-centric focus, ethical considerations are also paramount. Importantly, fans are not a singular homogenous group (Busse and Hellekson 2012:41). Thus, ethical stances need to be scrutinised/contextualised to factor such heterogeneity (Whiteman 2016). Likewise, '[e]thical approaches can and should vary, depending on the data, information and knowledge the researcher wants to collect' (Jensen 2016:270). Zubernis and Davis explain that, '[o]nline communities offer a unique opportunity to study fans' behaviour unmediated by the presence of an observer... However, this ease of collecting data without subjects' consent makes the ethical landscape complicated' (2016:302). Therefore, it is important to establish the online data collected in this study as part of its ethical contextualisation. Rather than original transformative fan art, this research focuses on image texts which are either screen grabs – stills from extant media object – or photos – of set locations and characters/actors. Such images do not reveal any personal information about the users (Russmann and Svensson 2017:3). Similarly, given the ease of the image texts' spreadability (Jenkins et al 2013:2-3), acknowledging a single author of the image is very difficult, especially when (anti-)fans themselves are remixing and/or recirculating content. Lastly, part of the *ITF* fan activism strategies was to gain wider public recognition to save the show. Therefore, the accompanying image texts were discursively public. Therefore, I take Bethan Jones' ethical stance that because these image texts are 'statements professing *straightforward* declarations of textual fandom [or anti-fandom]' (2016:290), consent was not deemed necessary. However, I have anonymised all personal details to minimise 'intrusion into the fan community' (Bore and Hickman 2013).

In noting the limitations of the research, netnography is unable to account for individuals that use forums but do not post and/or those who do not go online at all to discuss screen media. Therefore, these samples 'cannot be taken to be representative of all fan viewers' (Bourdau and Delmar 2016:5). Yet, they do offer insights into particular images practices engaging with specific TV horror texts.

From Characters to Actors: *ITF*'s Supportive Fan Imagery

Set in the fictional town of Roarton, Lancashire, *ITF*'s working-class characters, post-industrialised northern landscapes, and bleak washed-out hues, engage with British social realism and its 'kitchen sink' aesthetics (Elliott-Smith 2016:175-6). The narrative is 'told through the perspective of zombie Kieren Walker, who suffers from partially deceased syndrome (PDS)' (Pulliam 2014:143). With a medical cure restoring cognitive brain function, PDS sufferers return from an undead form akin to modern zombiedom and re-occupy a human state. With the zombies undergoing psychosomatic restoration and being subsequently reintroduced back into society, this causes political division and aggressive xenophobic outbursts by humans.

Furthermore, the central sentient undead protagonist Kieran is gay. *ITF* uses the zombie body to directly address homophobia and question cultural constructions of Otherness, utilising what Stacey Abbott terms an I-zombie perspective: where ‘the zombie is not only sympathetic but is also the narrator or focalising perspective of the text’ (2016:163). This narrative device aids in hybridising the horror genre with British social realism in a novel fashion indicative of twenty first century British youth television (Woods 2015).

Faye Woods argues that British youth television takes a ‘frank attitude towards “explicit” content – swearing, sexuality, drink and drugs ... combined with a tendency towards emotional bleakness and a fondness for the mundane everyday’ (2016:69), presented as a marker of authenticity in comparison to glossy US youth television (Woods 2015:233). Woods adds that the candidness surrounding controversial subject matter is ‘balanced on a sliding scale with an investment in emotion and intimacy, a drawing close that connects with the melodrama inherent in explorations of the intensity of youth



Fig.1. Rick and Kieran together smiling with the text ‘Ren + Rick 4ever’.



Fig.2. Kieran and Amy laughing together with Amy’s line ‘You’re my best dead friend forever’ superimposed over the image.

experience' (2016:70). It is this melodrama, over *ITF*'s social realist bleakness and zombie horror, which dominates fans' imagery during the text's broadcast (**Figs.1-2**).

Such image posts present 'reiteration discourse ... repeatedly inscribing particular elements with value' (Bore 2017:14), via the 'aesthetic customization' of image posts (Renninger 2014:7). This is evident in *ITF* fan imagery, where the majority of visuals centre on characters' relationships. This demonstrates 'semantic reproduction of textual elements and syntactic appropriation of ideological moments from the media text' (Booth 2015:26), but also serves as a visual marker of affective engagement by audiences.

Fan posts champion the text's emotive characteristics (Morimoto 2018), focusing on the undead characters Kieren, Rick Macy (David Walmsley), Simon Monroe (Emmett Scanlan), and Amy Dyer (Emily Bevan). Moreover, rather than engaging with sympathetic monsters as allegorical of wider cultural Othering (Abbott 2016:169), fan imagery indicates strong affective/emotive attachment. Fan imagery stresses the melodramatic and romantic intimacy between characters, subduing ideological readings and muting the horror genre coding of the parent text (**Fig.3**):



Fig.3. Kieren removing Simon's make-up, asking him to be who he truly is

The queer romances of Kieren and Rick, then Kieren and Simon, as well as Kieren and Amy's friendship as 'best dead friends forever', dominate fans' online visuals where posters upload their own edited images, screen grabs, and/or reposts of BBC3 stills. As a result, images shift away from framing the undead body as abject, instead displaying zombie characters as markedly human and focusing on the presence of friendships and relationships over the characters' troubled pasts.

Furthermore, slash fanfic and art has traditionally queered textual content by creating same-sex/non-heteronormative love interests between characters (Tosenberger 2008:185-6). However, *ITF* fans do not engage with canon subversion, primarily since, much in the way that '*Glee* already "slashes" itself ... [by] depicting in canon the kinds of homosexual relationships that used to be the domain of fanfiction' (Ellison 2013:114), the series focuses on queer relationships (Elliott 2016:107). *ITF*'s love interests – both homosexual (Kieren and Rick/Simon) and heterosexual (Amy and Philip) – are selected and

brought to the fore in fan-created ‘shipper’ visuality⁴ (Duffett 2013:198). Such sentiments reinforce arguments around the deep affinity that fans share with the text’s characters (Booth 2012a:310). Here, authenticity and quality pertain to characters’ relationships rather than to the spectacle of horror (Booth 2012b). However, after the first series’ broadcast and with no immediate declaration by BBC3 of a second series, fan discourse and discussions evidenced concern with the state of *ITF*. Anxiety manifested in fans’ responses between the first and second series, as they feared that *ITF* was not just ‘dormant’ (Williams 2015:191) but cancelled and ‘post-object’⁵ (Williams 2011:269). However, on the 22nd of May 2013 BBC3 visually confirmed a second series on Twitter (**Fig.4**):



Fig.4. BBC3 image post tweet of Kieren half in his undead form and half human, indicating the second series will return in 2014

With this announcement, fan discourse shifts temporarily away from diegetic character relationships. Instead, fans focus on extra-textual qualities such as filming/shot locations and the actors who play beloved characters (**Fig.5**):



Fig.5. A fan post offers a photo of where *ITF* is filmed

These images provide markers of fan (and textual) authenticity. *ITF* fans during this period of filming ‘desire foreknowledge ... as soon as possible, trading rumours along with “set

reports” and photos’ (Hills 2010:71), with fans ‘pre-textual poaching’ involving shared images of set locations that added weight to their hypotheses about future plotlines (ibid:70; Bennett 2014:10). But since fans are emerging from a state of uncertainty, these visuals also provide emotional restoration and proof that there is still life in the series, rather than simply acting as spoilers (Jenkins et al 2013:301). Yet, these types of images are not limited to grassroots fan texts, but are also evident in official industry visuals posted on Twitter (**Figs.6-7**):



Fig.6. Emily Bevan and Luke Newberry on Set. BBC3 tweeted ‘1st peek behind the rainy scenes of [#IntheFlesh!](#) [@Lukewnewberry](#) tries not to smudge his makeup. He'd suit a smokey eye.’



Fig.7. Emmett Scanlan on set having his hair fixed. BBC3 tweeted ‘Looking 4 great hold every time you go out to eat (someone)? *Zombie Xtra*: stays firm even while slaying. [#IntheFlesh.](#)’

Matt Hills notes that with new *Doctor Who*, ‘public filming puts spoiler-gathering fans in opposition to official PR strategy’ (2010:70). However, during *ITF*’s production, BBC3 offered

ample extra-textual/behind-the-scenes images. This shifting from diegetic to non-diegetic visuals add further affective reinstatement, being used by fans *alongside* pre-textually poached imagery. BBC3's bids to attract, and align themselves with, young digital audiences beyond the realm of amalgamating informal and formal media economies (Lobato and Thomas 2015), sees an aesthetic affinity between poached images and official posts. This suggests industry attempts to appease fans, authenticating the *ITF*/BBC3 brand in the process (Woods 2016:243-6). This toing-and-froing between audience and producer texts is further blurred when analysing fans (re)posts of *ITF* actors' photos (**Figs.8-9**):



Fig.8. Harriet Cains, Luke Newberry and Emily Bevan



Fig.9. Luke Newberry, Emily Bevan (above), Harriet Cains (below) and *ITF*'s creator Dominic Mitchell taking a photo together.

Fans posting images of the actors beyond set locations reinforce the authenticity of the emotional friendships they have with one another. As Louisa Ellen Stein argues,

[f]ans build on circulating star texts just as they do the characters those stars bring to life, often combining the two or muddying the supposed distinction between fictional and real. Fans make star-focused ... fan art ... creating star texts as flexible and multiplicitous as any other fan texts. (2015:139)

Fans frequently post pre-textual visuals of actors Luke Newberry, Emily Bevan, Harriet Cains, and Emmett Scanlan, and the show's writer Dominic Mitchell, in fun and convivial settings. Such photos are often taken from the cast's public Twitter pages (Chin and Hills 2008), authenticating their friendships on- and off-screen, and heightening fan-text engagement.

During broadcast of the second series, fan posts returned to focusing on the relationships of characters within the storyworld, as previously discussed. However, on the 6th February 2014, BBC3 gave an official statement of the cessation of *ITF*. Thus becoming a 'post-object', fans endeavoured to save the series through activist strategies (see Savage

2014, Barton 2014, Aloï and Johnston 2015:7-8). This included the online campaign #saveintheflesh. Alongside textual commentary, images were used in fan activist strategies (Figs.10-11):



Fig.10. A fan activist image post shows Kieren, Rick, and Amy in their undead state, with Jem crying and Simon looking pensive, alongside the hashtag #saveintheflesh.



Fig.11. A fan activist image of Simon lying on top of Kieren with the text 'We need you!' directed at the audience. Information about getting the hashtag trending is given, alongside a call to sign and share fan petitions.

Fan activism sought to renew the show using 'social media to spread awareness and updates about the campaign' (Chew 2018), and encouraged activist strategies such as signing online petitions. Moreover, the Facebook groups become a space for fans to share 'their love [for *ITF*] ... as well as their rage and despair over the cancellation [of it]' (ibid). This is not only articulated verbally, but performed through emotive image texts. Stressing

the ensemble cast as an indicator of quality TV (Lay 2007:236-7), protest imagery also used the relationships of the characters, and how they attempted to save one another, as emotional anchors and visual catalysts for activist engagement. Whilst this echoes fans' image texts that focus on *ITF*'s characters and their relationships discussed in the first section, there is a marked shift from humanising depictions to characters in distressed and/or undead states. Thus, rather than muting *ITF*'s horror qualities as the previous examples do, the protest image texts bring the genre to the fore. If during times of active broadcast security fans' visuals tend to focus on the characters in non-abject states, activist imagery emphasises the horror aspects of the text, whereby the undead body mirrors the potentially 'undead' state of the text itself. Therefore, the image call fans on social media to save the series and its characters from their abject state.

By using the archival function of Facebook groups' timeline feature, this section has evidenced *ITF* fan engagement via online image posts that, whilst oscillating around the text's sympathetic monsters, are also crucially related to fans' longitudinal relationship during, between, and after the series aired. When the text is read as active, posts focus on the liveness of the characters and their relationships. During times of uncertainty, extra-textual qualities of the actors who play the characters help to emphasise that the show still has life in it. But as the text becomes 'post-object' then characters are increasingly shown as abject/undead, needing the audience to keep them alive, literalising the 'zombified' text (Williams 2015:168) and potentially the fandom (Whiteman and Metivier 2013:294). Such arguments demonstrate how audiences' affective registers towards media content shift over time, often in relation to the serial development and/or state of the text. Lastly, and by way of introducing my next case study, posts on Twitter edited *ITF* together with *TWD* in the form of a meme that suggested the multi-/transfandom of both zombie series (Hassler-Forest 2016:3) (**Fig.12**):



Fig.12. Meme image shows Daryl indicating there is a 'walker' – a term commonly used in *TWD* to refer to zombies, spliced with an image of Kieren Walker, to the bemusement of Daryl.

Humour is derived from the vernacular used in *TWD* to demarcate the zombie Other, a 'walker', being spliced with *ITF*'s undead protagonist Kieren Walker's surname. However, whilst this demonstrates the potential for zombie transfandom between the two TV horror texts, different audience engagement manifests when comparing image texts engaging with the respective series. Moreover, 'memes are not just for ... entertainment' (Harlow 2013:64). Such image texts have been used as political tools for challenging *TWD*'s construction of Black masculinity and/or characterisation. It is this line of thought that the article will now focus on.

From the Margins to the Foreground: Textual Image Poaching of *TWD*'s Black Males

AMC's *TWD* takes place in a post-apocalyptic landscape populated by zombie hordes and human survivors. Centring on Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) who leads a human faction, *TWD*'s 'ongoing serial narrative ... is distinctive in its orientation to the *human survivors* and their struggle to re-constitute something that looks like a viable social order in the post-apocalyptic world' (Keetley 2014:6).

As noted in the Introduction, *TWD* has been recognised as a successful cult and commercial franchise (Smith 2017:7), mainstreaming the zombie (Hassler-Forest 2014:91), with its gore read as a marker of premium cable 'quality' TV discourse (Jowett and Abbott 2013:12), and being instrumental in making graphic horror acceptable on television (Brown 2018:175). However, if user-generated/shared visuals show an audience-character affinity in *ITF* fandom, *TWD* images evidence affective discord between on-screen and real world identities. A diverse range of memes focus on *TWD*'s characterisations of Black masculinity, or lack thereof (**Figs.13-14**):



Figs.13 and 14. Memes of T-Dog superimposed with text indicating stereotypical representations in *TWD*.

Memes predominantly focus on T-Dog (Irone Singleton) being the central Black male and yet marginalised in comparison to *TWD*'s white characters, reduced to a racial stereotype (Johnson 2017:17). This is emphasised by either showing him in isolation, or in relation/juxtaposed to white characters. Like *ITF*, these posters' *TWD* image posts do not focus on 'quality' graphic gore. Rather, (anti-)fans recode and re-evaluate the text as online images provide alternative 'grids of intelligibility' (Newman 2010:60), which present intratextual reading strategies centring on racial marginalisation and Othering. Memes also allude to how *TWD*'s interracial dynamics resonate with Black males' disempowerment by hegemonic white patriarchy within wider culture (Bayerl and Stoykov 2016:1015-7), and diegetic post-apocalyptic spaces where oppressive institutions are no longer functional, i.e. prisons (Figs.15-16).



Fig.15. Meme of T-Dog highlighting his servile role within the group indicative of Black oppression in the US.

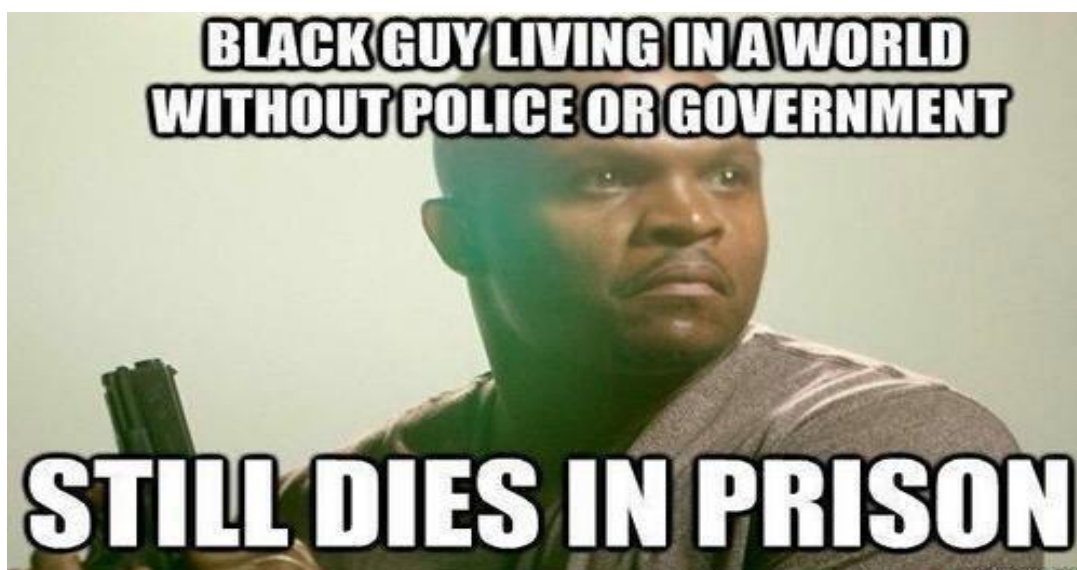


Fig.16. Meme of T-Dog superimposed with text indicating more stereotypical representations in *TWD*.

Similarly, other memes comment on the silence of T-Dog, delineating his lack of character development, and just when emotional depth is afforded to him, he is killed off (see **Figs.17-18**):



Fig.17 Meme of T-Dog superimposed with the text 'What would T-Dog say? Probably nothing', highlighting his silence.



Fig.18. Meme of T-Dog reinforcing his marginality.

Other memes play with horror's propensity to kill off Black characters before white characters (Coleman 2011:XIII-XIV), illustrating how cultural dynamics inform genre expectations and evaluations (Mittell 2004:14-7) (**Figs.19-20**):

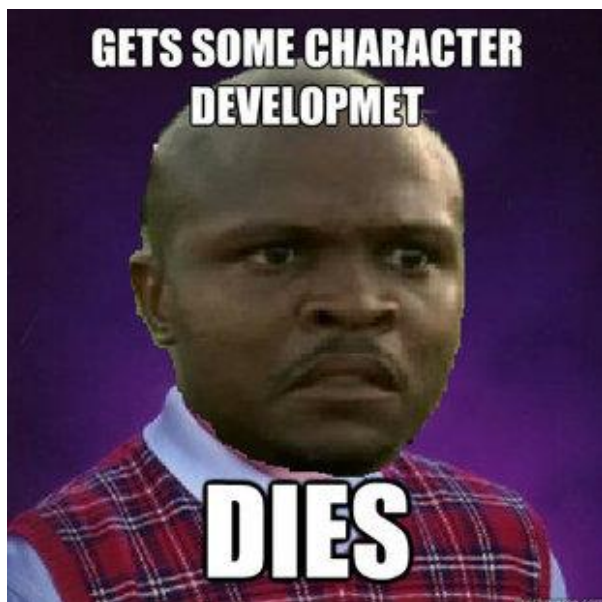


Fig.19 and 20 Meme of T-Dog that highlight how the character development of Black males in *TWD* is narratively linked to their deaths. **Fig 20.** Meme highlighting the longevity of T-Dog in *TWD* as atypical of characters of colour in the horror genre.

These memes focus less on the reductive representation of T-Dog. Rather, his ability to last this long is made into a point of humorous praise. Somewhat different to the serious tone of anti-fan writing (Rendell 2019), the humorous recoding of the Black male body via textual poaching suggests that '[t]his criticism can still be described as a potentially pleasurable form of engagement' (Atkinson and Kennedy 2015:14), with posts identifying and critiquing the 'narrative function' of the series (Hills 2015a:152-3).

Another central discourse memes emphasised is *TWD*'s formulaic structuring, and minimal visibility, of Black males. These examples utilise the viscosity and structural content of memes to splice together the respective males of the series during moments of threat and fear as a wider commentary on the text's 'Black male quota' (Figs.21-22):



Figs.21-22. Memes bringing together Black males in *TWD* to verify their propensity for being killed off ... and being killed off.

Within the series' narrative, these characters do not encounter one another, yet intratextual narrativisation is created through these memes by incongruously grouping the characters together. Such meta-commentary also visually verifies audiences' ideological claims of marginality and the killing off of certain characters. This textual poaching brings to the fore posters' perceived racial subtexts and narrative structures in *TWD*, subtexts which their image-based appropriations work to highlight.

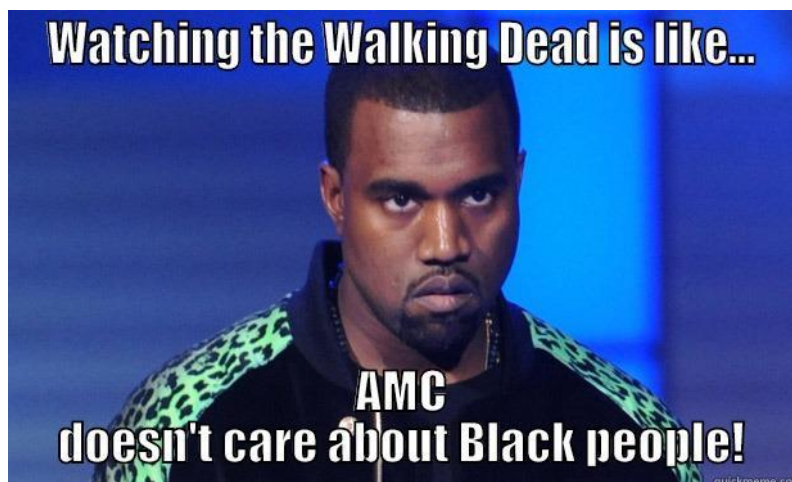
Some *TWD* memes also offer a direct visual comparison between the original comic book series and the TV series' characterisations of Black masculinity: the former are strong depictions integral to the survival of the group, whilst the latter are framed via the silent and disempowered body of T-Dog. Specific characters such as Tyreese (Chad Coleman),

using his alternative comic book representation, are deployed to challenge prevailing incarnations in the TV series (**Fig.23**):



Fig.23. Meme showing how Tyreese in the comic series has become disempowered as a black male in his TV series depiction, becoming another T-Dog.

Whilst the examples thus far have solely used *TWD*'s own imagery as part of the interpretive and affective grids of reading the TV series itself, other image posts use pre-existing meme vernacular, recognised visual markers, and/or intertextual references to engage with *TWD*'s racial representations (see **Figs.24-27**):



Figs.24-25. Memes using popular culture and meme vernacular that questions *TWD*'s Black stereotyping.



Fig.26. Meme showing all Black male characters (as *Star Trek*'s expendable 'redshirts') serving the *TWD*'s White male hero Grimes.



Fig.27. Meme using popular culture and meme visual vernacular positing that *TWD* is racist.

These posts may appeal to a range of audiences, such as *TWD* (anti-)fans, fans of other cult media such as *Star Trek*, *Futurama*, and/or *Star Wars*, and 'MemeGeeks' who place such texts 'in the meme canon'⁶ (Milner 2014). Lastly, 'casual users' who do not make memes but readily share them through social media sites may simply find the images/content funny (Bayerl and Stoyanov 2016:1009-10). Moreover, images are not restricted to one site or audience type as the spreadability of online media fosters myriad applications (Jenkins et al 2013:2-3), recontextualising the Black body in the process.

No longer peripheral, posters' image-poaching centres on Black male bodies, 'disconnecting' textual content so that it can be recontextualised to provide new frameworks of meaning. These posts focus less 'on the look and feel' of *TWD*'s horror (Gillan 2016:12), and more on appropriating 'elements of a story world or a characterization' (ibid). Such racial readings and authentication via image texts can be understood via Matt Hills' notion of 'discursive prioritisation'. Hills explains that 'for some fan audiences ... elevating "homosexual subtext," or "not-so-subtext," to the status of narrative focus means selecting out one thread of polysemic textual material for communal and discursive prioritisation' (2015a:153). In this instance, racial subtexts are the foci of readings manifest in memes, which bring to the fore championed characters and/or problematic representations. Here, the trials and tribulations of white protagonists are absented (although a plethora of other images and memes stress whiteness) in favour of focusing on the text's reductive racial scripts (Simpson 2017:135-6). Resultantly, *TWD* imagery is used by audiences who ideologically-reinscribe the post-apocalyptic space, whereby the structured absence and ineptitude of the Black body is distilled from *TWD*'s serial narrative via textual poaching.

However, one must also consider on what social media platforms such texts and their racial discursive prioritisation proliferate, and where they are less common.

Dominique Johnson's research in *TWD* fan forums found that when criticisms were made of the racial representations of the black female character Michonne (Danai Gurira), the habitual response from largely white members was one of dismissiveness and even hostility that refuted such readings (201:265). Resultantly, certain space is part of, and continued, the 'circulation and reiteration of white hegemony' (ibid), whilst also circulating 'antiblack sentiment within seemingly neutral contexts' (Johnson 2015:268). As I have explained elsewhere, 'this is not to say that Black fans are not welcome to enter this online space and engage in discussions; however, they may do so only at the expense of negating, neutralizing, and nullifying their intersectional analyses of race and gender' (Rendell 2019, see also Pande 2018). However, on other online sites and social media platforms there is far less habitual hegemony instilled by 'a deep engagement in social relationships' (Kozinets 2015:35), which is determined by white de-racialisation communal discourse. For example, websites like *Nerds of Colour* engage with popular culture and racial discourse. Secondly, 'Black Twitter' has emerged as 'the discovery that Black usage of the popular media service at times dominated Twitter discourse. This went against the popular perceptions of White-dominated Internet use' (Brock 2012:529). Furthermore, such digital produsage 'can be understood as a discursive, public performance of Black identity' (ibid:537), whilst also creating 'digital counterpublics' that 'actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities' (Hill 2018:287). Finally, Steele argues that blogs replicate 'the kind of oral cultural exchange central to the black community in the United States' (2018:113), which 'function as space which is constructed by and for African Americans' (ibid:120). Furthermore, unlike Twitter, '[w]ithout trending hashtags ... to alert the dominant group of their presence, blogs can interrogate black culture and art without engaging with the dominant group' (ibid). Unsurprisingly then, compared to social media sites such as Reddit and *The Walking Dead* wiki fan forum where racial discourse is uncommon or even refuted (Johnson 2015), blogs and Twitter's affordance of racial readings/performances are where such image texts have been predominantly disseminated.

On such sites and platforms, some images texts are uploaded to reinforce the discourse evident in the written *logos* of Black audiences (Bayerl and Stoykov 2016:1007). Informed by their own cultural marginality and mistreatment, these online posts challenged racial representations in the TV series (Rendell 2019). Makers of these memes 'actively intervene in the formation and propagation of [*TWD* and the Black male body] ... and leave their own mark by modifying it' (Bayerl and Stoykov 2016). This is done by isolating the body, undermining textual context/ideology, and hence opening up a space for 'context flexibility' (ibid:1014). In these instances, image content is used to support explicitly politicised arguments, providing visual verifiers of the discourse of audiences' written responses. For example, some memes were posted on *The Nerds of Color* and blogs

accompanying articles on the series' racial issues as reflective of wider US race-related issues (Rendell 2019), evidencing pro-civic engagement.

While image posts can support racial and civic discourse, memes might be read as shallow or superficial in their engagement compared to traditional political commentary (van Zoonen 2005:11). It is also '[h]ard to tell what effects civic engagement through social media will have or how effective it is' (Jenkins 2016:6), with allegations of clicktivism/slacktivism stressing alleged disengagement with 'real-world' political practices (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2015:2). Whilst *ITF* fan imagery is discursively located within fan activist rhetoric and practices when the audience is trying to save the text, *TWD* memes are not overtly used in traditional (anti-)fan activism. Yet, the continued uploading and sharing of memes keeps oxygen flowing to the critical discourse surrounding Black masculinity in the TV series, publicising and reinforcing critical arguments (Bayerl and Stoyanov 2016:1010).

Furthermore, whilst such image texts can be found on sites that present critical readings informed by racial discursive prioritisation, these memes can also be found on sites such as *knowyourmeme*. Therefore, other sites can recontextualise memes to make fun of the disempowered silent Black body, especially on sites that use these images to reinforce racial stereotypes (see Nakayama 2017, Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016). Whilst amusement is a core intention for memes, the broader their dissemination, the more indistinct their discourse becomes. Flexibility in content and dissemination concurs with the argument that 'humour as success criterion ... may be a double-edged sword for political memes' (Bayerl and Stoyanov 2016:1017). Social demarcations between different viewers and responses to memes also depend on audiences' 'familiarity with the original series and/or an individual or social ... sensibility that may enhance reading the new meanings created by the [meme] text as resistant or not' (Dhaenens 2012:446). Moreover, what is found in these posts typically represents a critical exposure of Black male marginality; something not present in *TWD* itself. Thus, whilst perhaps not definitively leading to forms of wider fan activism where fans' detailed knowledge is used in civic action (Kligler-Vilenchik 2016:109) or where imagery is used for outwardly oriented 'politicised' fandoms' 'desire to change wider society' (Dean 2017:413), we can still see how close engagement with *TWD* offers 'a resource around which young people are making connections to civic and political worlds' (Kligler-Vilenchik 2016:107).

Such extensive commentary and usage of digital media at a grassroots level concurs with Jenkins and Shresthova's argument that 'no one instantiation of the message is likely to reach all potential audiences, while deploying diverse communication practices is likely to accelerate the spread and extend the reach of ... [a] shared agenda' (2016:262). It is by analysing these multiple iterations of racial engagement with(in) *TWD* that civic issues inflecting the storyworld can provide overarching arguments around racial representation.

Considering how the Black body in *TWD* is ideologically reinscribed, textual poaching of canonical imagery and meme culture brings to the fore the programme's secondary Black bodies as an act of 'discursive prioritisation' (Hills 2015a:152-3). Political humour distils those characters that 'show' the silent Black body, reinscribing such characters within a

critical discourse that is mapped onto *TWD*'s storyworld. Moreover, remixing within meme culture reinforces such sentiments by bringing together repeatedly marginalised Black males, providing strength in numbers to the reading strategies put forward in these posts that evidence new grids of anti-racist and critical meaning. Thus, whilst potentially humorous in their construction, memes, like other audience texts, present audience thematic deconstruction of screen media. Furthermore, the spreadable dissemination of memes across a range of social media platforms means that 'posts on non-political... websites [and social media platforms] may serve as political forums' (Steele 2018:113).

Conclusion

In looking to expand beyond the scriptural *logos* of audiences writing, the circulation of users' image texts 'broadens the scope of television studies during a period of expansion... [in] the number of platforms ... which ... re-circulate television content' (Gillan 2016:21). Echoing Irmgard Wetzstein, the article interprets users' images 'based on an understanding of visuals as cultural products providing knowledge about the "world" and generating meaning by making things visible or unseen ... and a concept of discourse referring to sociology of knowledge, aiming at grasping collective knowledge repertoires' (2017:27). To do this, a netnography of users' images was undertaken, in order to 'understand the particularities of *pictures* as symbolic, visual media ... embedded in communicative practices, and ... take into account social media *platforms*, which are understood as active participants with specific possibilities and constraints' (Schreiber 2017:39). Whilst this method cannot account for lurkers – those who go online but do not post – by using discourse analysis of the ample data sets provided, demonstrated rich semiotic content that displayed wider discourse, thematics, and trends.

This research has demonstrated how image posts offer salient data when looking at audiences' affective and active readings of screen media and how 'sharing practices become relevant in specific contexts and lifeworlds' (Schreiber 2017:37). In doing so, the paper has also given needed attention to horror audiences and audiences of colour. For *ITF*, the analysis examined how audience responses and engagement related to state of the text. In this case study, visual posts typically paralleled the status of characters: when the show was active then images centred on the lead characters and their relationships, focusing on melodrama over horror. When there was a degree of uncertainty, e.g. during the filming of the second season, posts used pre-textual poaching (Hills 2015b) and the actors' friendships to re-install textual qualities championed in the diegesis and reinforce a sense of forthcoming diegetic activity. When *ITF* was cancelled, fan activist imagery used the abject visuals of undead characters as part of their activist language to highlight how the series needs saving. In demonstrating the longitudinal remit of this research, the data shows how *ITF* audiences' image posts are not static, but can change over time, relative to their relationship with their championed text.

Whereas *ITF* image posts correspond to the state of text itself and are used to support fans' shifting engagement – from affirmational fandom to activism – *TWD* memes

are used to support/heighten the counter-ideological discourse that largely challenges representations and characterisation of Black masculinity in the TV series. The Black male body becomes a visual marker in meme posts that superimpose images textually poached from *TWD* with captions that subvert preferred textual meaning whilst bringing in wider debates about the mistreatment of poor Black men in the US. Semantically distilling official images that are undercut by superimposed text (Shifman 2013), users highlight the structured absence and relative ineffectiveness of Black males in *TWD* using textual content as a means of verifying readings. (Anti-)fans also play discursively with the intratextual structures of *TWD*'s different series by editing images that bring sporadic Black characters together, using their ironic collective presence to reinforce their marginalisation, and therefore validate audiences' readings. This article also highlights how images circulate within and across certain sites that have a general wider inclusion of racial discursive prioritisation, such as certain websites, Twitter, and blogs, compared to other sites. Such myriad habitual affordances, or lack thereof, are an important consideration for future studies into participatory cultures. As evidenced, the viscosity of horror provides audiences a plethora of image texts to play with. Much like the ever-growing undead horde roaming the post-apocalyptic landscape, the volume and spreadability of image posts also attests to the popularity of the zombie within popular culture. Furthermore, it highlights how zombie 'blankness' fosters a range of dynamic textual meanings through online image cultures that allows us to better understand horror audiences, the range and scope of affective engagement with screen media, and online identity performances.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2480514/releaseinfo?ref=tt_dt_dt

² https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1520211/releaseinfo?ref=tt_dt_dt

³ While the latter two groups are still active with users posting, the 'In The Flesh' group has since been deactivated and is no longer available at the time of writing.

⁴ Mark Duffett explains that, '[s]hippers are fans who are much more interested in the triumphs and tribulations of romantic relationships than in other aspects of the dramatic text' (2013:198).

⁵ This is defined by Rebecca Williams as when 'original fan objects cease to offer any new instalments ... [and the] fan moves into a period of post-object fandom' (2011:269). Williams adds that '[r]ather than considering post-object fandom as indicating that fandom is "over," the term is intended to allow us to consider the differences in fan practices... between periods when objects are ongoing or dormant' (ibid)

⁶ This audience's main interest 'in memes overall is part of a larger interest in the Internet and computer culture' (Milner 2014).